

CONTEMPORARY TRENDS IN WORLD TERRORISM

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The Structure of Shi'ite Terrorism

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The investigation of Shi'ite radicalism has a long tradition in Islamic studies. Almost since the advent of Islam, varieties of Shi'ism have provided the fuel for movements of protest and rebellion. The study of such movements has long drawn upon a careful methodology, grounded in the detailed examination of religious texts, and the modern radicals are no less prolific than their precursors. Before any other discipline can contribute to the understanding of contemporary Shi'ite radicalism and its violent manifestations, the traditional discipline must have its day. We need a fuller appreciation of the origins and explicit ideology of those Shi'ites committed to political violence, which only a reading of the modern radical texts can provide.¹

The Najaf Connection

The sources and structure of contemporary Shi'ite radicalism cannot be grasped without an understanding of the religious and political climate of Najaf, a Shi'ite shrine city dominated by massive domes and minarets. Najaf is situated on a baked Iraqi plain, around the revered tomb of the Imam Ali, the Prophet Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, who is venerated by all Shi'ites. Before the outbreak of the war between Iran and Iraq, Najaf teemed with pious pilgrims from Iran and elsewhere in the Shi'ite world.

Until recently, Najaf was also home to the most renowned Shi'ite academies of learning. Great ayatollahs, scholars, and students assembled from throughout the Shi'ite world—the majority from Iran,

others from Iraq, the Arab Gulf states, Lebanon, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India. In Najaf they studied sacred law, theology, and philosophy, according to the medieval pedagogical methods of the Islamic academy. The schools were unburdened by government control and submitted to no external academic authority. There were no presidents, deans, or masters. The great ayatollahs maintained the academies through donations that flowed in from the masses of Shi'ite believers. Students paid no tuition, teachers received no salaries; all were satisfied with modest stipends, which allowed them to pursue pious learning in conditions of the utmost austerity.²

It was in this setting of pious fastidiousness that contemporary Shi'ite extremism first took shape. Najaf in the late 1950s and the 1960s was a place of great intellectual ferment, fueled by the fears of Shi'ite clerics—the *ulama*—that their Islamic values and religious autonomy were threatened by Westernizing influences. Their response was to elaborate a theory of an Islamic state that could offer a satisfying alternative to the doctrines of nationalism and communism that had made inroads even in Najaf. The *ulama* thought, lectured, and wrote on such subjects as Islamic government, Islamic economics, and the ideal Islamic state. The most notable of these theorists were Ayatollahs Muhsin al-Hakim and Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr. Their teachings received an important endorsement in 1965, with the arrival in Najaf of Ayatollah Khomeini, who had been expelled from Iran for his agitation against the Shah's foreign and domestic policies. Khomeini spent the next 13 years of his exile in Najaf, where in 1970 he delivered his landmark lectures on Islamic government, calling upon Muslim men of religion to lay exclusive claim to all political authority.³

In the charged intellectual climate of Najaf, Shi'ite *ulama* subjected the existing political order to a withering critique and formulated an alternative in the revolutionary Islamic state. All who studied in Najaf during those years—Khomeini's students from throughout the Shi'ite world, but also the students of other great ayatollahs—were to some extent indoctrinated with this ideal, at an impressionable moment, and in austere conditions of intense Muslim piety. They came away from Najaf with a coherent criticism of the world as it is, an often revolutionary program for change, and friendships spanning the Shi'ite world of scholarship.

The Shi'ite radicalism of today rests upon these very same men, on their teachings and on their international affiliations. Just as the intellectual climate of Cambridge in the 1930s produced a radicalism that led to treason, so Najaf of the late 1950s and the 1960s produced among its alumni an extremism that has nurtured terrorism. The Iraqi security authorities have since cleared Najaf of the more troublesome

ulama, and some have been executed. But the personal and ideological ties forged there have never been stronger, for with the success of the Islamic revolution in Iran, Khomeini was catapulted almost directly from exile in Najaf to power in Tehran. Since then, the network of old school affiliations has been transformed into an apparatus for generalizing—or “exporting”—that revolution, especially to Iraq and Lebanon. It is the Najaf background of many Shi'ite *ulama* that gives Shi'ite radicalism its international character.

What Najaf's alumni have done is essentially to replicate the structure of religious authority that characterizes the Shi'ite academy. The relationship of master to disciple, of the initiated to the novice, has been reproduced in many Najafs—in Qom, Tehran, South Beirut, South Lebanon, and wherever there are activist Shi'ite *ulama*. They teach, preach, and indoctrinate the same set of ideas that so influenced them in Najaf, recreating with their followers the same bonds of absolute spiritual dependence that tied them to their own teachers. In this manner, they have built dedicated followings. What are often called Shi'ite extremist or terrorist “organizations” are in fact men of religion in the circle of their disciples. It is the disciples, fired by the vision elaborated by the man of religion, who take action, with the certain acquiescence and possible foreknowledge of their inspirational leader. Some of these radical circles are quite small, but a few have grown to such size that the contact between the man of religion and the disciple is mediated by lesser clerics and functionaries. Because of their size and the prominence of their leaders, three of these groups warrant description as examples of the ideological and structural variation in Shi'ite radicalism today.

Hizb al-Da'wa al-Islamiyya

The oldest of the radical Shi'ite groups is, in fact, Iraqi, and was founded in Najaf in 1959. *Hizb al-Da'wa al-Islamiyya*—the “Party of the Islamic Call”—has gained some recent notoriety for its probable involvement in the suicide bombing of the U.S. embassy in Kuwait in December 1983, the hijacking of a Kuwaiti airliner to Tehran in December 1984, and the attempt on the life of the Amir of Kuwait in May 1985. Al-Da'wa emerged originally as a Shi'ite response to the social distress of Iraq's Shi'ites and the Iraqi regime's threat to the autonomy of Najaf's *ulama*. It therefore enjoyed the spiritual patronage of the leading Iraqi Shi'ite divines of the day, including the charismatic Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr and the highest Iraqi Shi'ite clerical authority of the time, Ayatollah Muhsin al-Hakim. Al-Da'wa began its course as a subversive group operating within Iraq, gaining influence in clerical and lay circles in the 1960s. Since 1969,

the regime has pursued a systematic campaign against al-Da'wa, which in turn calls for the overthrow of the Iraqi Ba'thist regime and the installation of an Islamic one in its stead. After the Iranian Revolution, so vocal was Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr in support of Khomeini that the Iraqi regime had him seized and secretly executed. Sons of the late Ayatollah Muhsin al-Hakim fled to Iran, to lead the movement from Tehran. Remaining members of the Hakim family have been imprisoned and executed by the Iraqi authorities, in a heavy-handed attempt to silence the Shi'ite opposition.

The distinguishing feature of al-Da'wa is that its establishment predates the rise of Khomeini, and in this it takes a special pride. Al-Da'wa represents an autonomous Iraqi Shi'ite movement, with its own traditions of spiritual guidance, deeply rooted in the Najaf experience. In the present circumstances, al-Da'wa has no choice but to depend almost entirely upon Iran, and there does exist an obvious identity of interests between Iran and the leader of al-Da'wa, Hujjat al-Islam Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim. Several military camps in Iran are reportedly run by al-Da'wa to train Iraqi Shi'ite refugees for Iran's war with Iraq and to support its own operations against the Iraqi regime. But there remains an undercurrent of autonomist sentiment in al-Da'wa, discernible in the organization's publications. In al-Da'wa's vision, liberated Iraq will not be absorbed into Iran; al-Da'wa will no longer be dependent but will emerge as a full and equal partner of Iran; Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, hailing from an Iraqi family enjoying considerable prestige throughout the Shi'ite world, will exercise his own spiritual and temporal authority in Islamic Iraq, just as Khomeini does in Islamic Iran. It is therefore possible to detect a certain tension between al-Da'wa and Iran, differences not over method or means, but on ultimate aims. Yet in their exile, the leadership of al-Da'wa, uprooted from Najaf, which once sustained them, have had to make themselves subservient to the Qom clerics.⁴

Islamic Action Organization

Al-Da'wa has been forced to share Iranian attentions with an organization that is willingly and utterly subservient to Iran: *Munazzamat al-Amal al-Islami*, the "Islamic Action Organization." While al-Da'wa has its roots in Najaf, Islamic Action traces its origins back to Karbala, yet another Shi'ite shrine city in Iraq. Its founder was the Karbala-schooled Sayyid Hasan Shirazi, an enigmatic figure who, when assassinated in Beirut in 1980—probably by Iraqi agents—was a triple-national, holding Iraqi, Iranian, and Lebanese passports. He had spent most of his last decade in Lebanon, and quite a few of his followers were Lebanese Shi'ites. After his murder, leadership of

Islamic Action was bestowed by Khomeini upon a personal disciple and former student, the Karbala-born Hujjat al-Islam Sayyid Muhammad Taqi al-Mudarrisi—a cleric noted for his personal charisma and his total fealty to his former teacher and reportedly critical of al-Da'wa for not showing sufficient zeal for the Imam Khomeini. His is the only group to claim credit openly for suicide bombings; a much-cited source quotes Sayyid Muhammad Taqi as saying that "in one week I can gather 500 of the faithful who are prepared to launch suicide operations. No border will stop them."⁵ Sayyid Muhammad Taqi has lately denied that he is the moving spirit behind suicide attacks,⁶ and Islamic Action's field of operations would appear to have been limited so far to Iraq. Still, Islamic Action has members from other countries, including Lebanon, and a strongly pan-Islamic thread runs through Sayyid Muhammad Taqi's teachings. Sayyid Muhammad Taqi's brother, Sayyid Hadi al-Mudarrisi, leads the Tehran-based Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain, which was involved in an abortive coup attempt in December 1981. Sayyid Muhammad Taqi's complete subservience to Iran makes Islamic Action a much more pliable instrument of Iranian policy than al-Da'wa, and he may be admitted to planning circles from which al-Da'wa's leaders are excluded.⁷

The prospects of these two leading Iraqi Shi'ite groups—as well as some lesser organizations—are bound up inextricably with the outcome of the war between Iraq and Iran. In their assigned task of disrupting life in Iraq and stirring Iraq's Shi'ites to rebellion, the groups have had no noteworthy success. Stymied in Iraq, they have turned instead to operational activities in and against Kuwait. It is along the Arab littoral of the Persian Gulf that the Iraqi organizations may yet have their most disruptive impact.

Hizballah

Any discussion of Lebanon's radical Shi'ites must begin with an obvious but important observation: the leaders of Lebanese radical groups are not ensconced in Tehran as exiles. The Iraqi *ulama* around whom the Iraqi groups revolve were driven into exile by the brutal policy of repression adopted by the Iraqi regime, and Najaf today is an empty vessel. In marked contrast, the groups in Lebanon operate with hardly any impediment in that country's climate of rule by militia. The Shi'ite *ulama* are not separated from the Shi'ite masses by a war front and a hostile regime but operate openly in the three major Shi'ite population centers of the Beka'a, Beirut, and the South.

It is this lack of central authority in Lebanon that has so encouraged both Iran's and Lebanon's own Shi'ite radicals. In the Iranian view, Lebanon is ripe for Islamic revolution. A former Iranian ambassador to

Lebanon explains that governments have been the "biggest obstacle to starting Islamic movements in the world," but since the Lebanese government "does not have much power, there is no serious obstacle in the way of the people of Lebanon."⁸ To this we might add that in Lebanon are assembled the major "enemies of Islam"—the United States, France, Israel, the Phalangists—yet they are incapable of responding effectively to the extremism their presence has stimulated. Then, too, there is the importance in Lebanon of a restless Shi'ite population, which constitutes the country's largest single religious community. Lebanon is seen by Iran as the weakest Arab link, far more vulnerable than Iraq, because in Lebanon there is no need to overthrow an existing regime—that has already been accomplished by a decade of civil war. All that remains is to install the new order.

But while it is customary to date the rise of the radical groups to the Iranian revolution—and their growing influence to the 1982 war—still deeper origins can be traced in the Najaf connections of some of Lebanon's Shi'ite *ulama*. These came in contact with al-Da'wa while studying in Iraq, lodged as they were in the same quarters, and seated before the same teachers, as their Iraqi Shi'ite classmates. The clearest example of such exposure is the instance of Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, commonly regarded as the spiritual patron of Shi'ite radicalism in Lebanon. Fadlallah was in fact born and raised in Najaf; his father, a scholar from South Lebanon, had settled there to study. In Najaf Fadlallah came into contact with the two leading inspirational figures in the Iraqi Da'wa, Ayatollahs Muhsin al-Hakim and Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr. Fadlallah arrived in Lebanon in 1966, and he built around himself a dedicated following of radical disciples who are moved by his rhetoric. His first radical affiliation was with the Lebanese Muslim Students' Union and then, more significantly, with the Lebanese branch of the Iraqi Da'wa, composed of Iraqi Shi'ite emigrés and Lebanese Shi'ites educated in the Iraqi shrine cities. By Fadlallah's own admission, he has been the target of several assassination attempts made against him on account of his anti-Iraqi activities. The man who serves as the spiritual lodestone of Shi'ite radicalism in Lebanon owes much to his formative period in Najaf.⁹

The importance of the Najaf experience is also illustrated by the careers of two of Fadlallah's leading protégés, in the Beka'a and the South. In the Beka'a, Shi'ite radicals congregated around Shaykh Subhi al-Tufayli, now regarded as the spiritual leader of Hizballah there. He spent nine years studying in Najaf. In South Lebanon, the extremists were attracted to Shaykh Raghīb Harb, prayer leader of the village of Jibshit. He, too, had studied in Najaf until expelled by Iraqi security authorities; Fadlallah then taught him in Beirut, before Shaykh Raghīb took up his own pulpit. Shaykh Raghīb fell victim to

an assassin's bullets in February 1984. All three men—in the three major Shi'ite population centers of Lebanon—served as pegs in a network that was in place even before Lebanon became the subject of intense Iranian interest. In addition, there emerged still other groups, smaller in size, which joined the radical camp, most notably Hussein al-Musawi's Islamic Amal, based in Baalbek. This represented a later development, indebted to the organizing energy of Iran. But it is clear that Lebanon's Shi'ite *ulama* had already produced their own brand of extremism by the late 1970s, which probably owed more to the Najaf-based traditions of al-Da'wa than to the Qom-based activism of Khomeini.

Hizballah—the "Party of God"—has appeared over the last year and a half as a generic name for all of the various radical Shi'ite groups operating in Lebanon, subsuming within it some of the previous designations, particularly al-Da'wa. The spread of this usage seems to stand in some correlation with the spread of direct Iranian influence over the radical Shi'ite camp, itself a result of an Iranian decision to invest more heavily in Lebanon. Hizballah appears to be a coalition of groups that owe some sort of fealty to the Imam Khomeini as *wali al-faqih*, the preeminent political and legal authority in Islam. It probably includes both the older Shi'ite radical groupings, in the tradition of al-Da'wa, and the newer converts who draw their inspiration directly from Iran. The latter are probably responsible for the spread of Khomeini's personality cult in Hizballah; the former are represented by Fadlallah. Like al-Da'wa in Iraq, Fadlallah's camp is radical; but it would also like to be autonomous, accepted by Iran as a full and equal partner. At the same time, Fadlallah and his followers claim a greater expertise than the Imam Khomeini's Levant "experts" in understanding the nuances and complexities of the Lebanese situation. This independent spirit has caused some friction. During his last two visits to Iran, Fadlallah was so bold as to inform his hosts that Lebanon was not ripe for Islamic revolution, based upon his reading of the Lebanese and regional situation. This reportedly upset the Iranians, creating an undeniable tension. Also revealing has been Fadlallah's expression of reservations about certain actions associated with Hizballah, such as kidnappings (including the TWA hijacking in June 1985) and public burnings of the Lebanese flag. Fadlallah's refusal to be identified publicly as the leader of Hizballah is presumably due to his lack of control over that part of Hizballah which is utterly subservient to Iran.

Both the subservient and autonomous activists in Hizballah are prepared to use violence and have done so in the past. Hizballah in its entirety regarded the struggle against the Multinational Force in Beirut and against Israel in South Lebanon as a *jihad* (holy war), to be

waged by any means. Fadlallah himself has openly labeled a number of suicide bombings as heroic, although he has consistently denied prior knowledge of their planning.¹⁰ The differences arise rather over the future face of Lebanon itself, and what is politically tactful and tactless in the Lebanese context. It would be mistaken, at this point, to see this tactical difference as an open division; it remains a disagreement among close collaborators. For Iran still needs Fadlallah: those Lebanese Shi'ites who are subservient to Iran cannot put forward a cleric with anything approaching the religious authority of Fadlallah, acquired through years of study, preaching, and writing. At the same time, no other outside patron is prepared to put at Fadlallah's disposal those means extended to him by Iran. It is this shared interest that is the base of the Hizballah coalition.

The best insight into the political doctrine of Hizballah is afforded by the group's platform, unveiled at a public rally in Beirut in February 1985.¹¹ This is a document of unrelieved extremism, which calls upon all Muslims to revere Khomeini, violently denounces the United States and France, and calls for the obliteration of Israel. The platform also represents an ideological justification for further violence, in hailing the April and October 1983 suicide bombings as "punishment" for the United States and France. The influence of the autonomists is to be found not in these positions, but in the document's appeal that the Lebanese people be allowed to decide freely their own form of government. The position of those subservient to Iran, in regarding all sovereignty as God's, admits no form other than Islamic government, so the reaffirmation of popular sovereignty represents a concession to the complexities of a heterogeneous Lebanon. But it is too early to tell which way Hizballah will ultimately lean on the question of whether or not it should function autonomously. Much will depend on the fortunes of Iran and Iran's willingness to invest effort and risk retribution in Lebanon.

Radicalism and Terrorism

Radicalism represents a mode of thinking; terrorism, a method of action. The most complex dimension of Shi'ite radicalism is its translation, under certain conditions, into terrorist or other violence. Nearly all of the radical organizations and *ulama* are careful to build a wall of deniability between themselves and acts of political violence that might bring retribution upon them. To preserve their anonymity yet make clear their motive, one or several of these groups claim to act in the name of "Islamic Jihad." Significantly, only in the suicide bombings carried out under this *nom de guerre* has a successful effort been made to conceal the identities of the perpetrators, in marked contrast to the suicide bombings carried out by secular organizations.

after which the bomber is usually named and lionized by his sponsors. Such reticence may be intended to protect Iran from charges of direct involvement, which could possibly be substantiated if the identities of the bombers were known. But it seems just as likely that the anonymity is meant to protect the men of religion whose radical preachings charge the atmosphere with violence. Each of the major Shi'ite radical organizations revolves around a spiritual guide who passed his formative period in Najaf, where he imbibed the pure doctrine of the Islamic state. The involvement of *ulama* in the actual planning of violence ranges from minimal to considerable; their task is above all one of providing religious and spiritual encouragement. Yet it would be a mistake to divorce them from the process that ultimately produces the violent act. Indeed, the *ulama* are at once the most essential and the most visible link in the chain of transmission. Without the support of Iraqi and Lebanese Shi'ite *ulama*, it is difficult to imagine that this political violence could flourish as it has. Yet to win their followings, radical *ulama* must preach openly in the mosques and make themselves known.

With all the importance of Iranian logistical support, it is the preaching of these *ulama* that has provided the essential ideological foundations of Shi'ite terrorism. The ideas championed by Iran were first articulated in the Arab world. Shi'ite radicals in Lebanon and Iraq have their own motives for violent action, even if they sometimes rely upon Iranian encouragement, as in Lebanon, or Iranian military backing, as in Iraq. Certainly in Lebanon, Shi'ite terrorism has all the ideological and human resources—the radical *ulama* and their disciples—to thrive quite independently. South Beirut, having eclipsed Najaf, may nurture a violence more ruthless than anything Iran could possibly manufacture.

Notes

1. For a general introduction to Shi'ism, see Etan Kohlberg, "The Evolution of the Shi'a," *Jerusalem Quarterly*, No. 27 (spring 1983), pp. 109–26.

2. For evocative descriptions of Najaf's academies, see Fadil Jamali, "The Theological Colleges of Najaf," *The Muslim World* 50, No. 1 (January 1960), pp. 15–22, and Jacques Berque, "Hier à Najaf et Karbalā'," *Arabica* 9, No. 3 (October 1962), pp. 325–42. Something of the atmosphere of Najaf can also be inferred from an anthropologist's study of another Shi'ite shrine city, Qom in Iran. See Michael M. J. Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: 1980).

3. For a translation of these lectures, see Ruhollah al-Musavi al-Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*, trans. and annotated by Hamid Algar (Berkeley, Calif.: 1981), pp. 27–166.

4. For the background to the radical organizations, see Hanna Batatu, "Iraq's Underground Shi'i Movements: Characteristics, Causes, and Prospects," *Middle East Journal* 35, No. 4 (autumn 1981), pp. 578-94. This should be supplemented by the details on Iraqi organizations provided in *al-Nashra* (Nicosia), No. 5 (December 1983), and No. 13 (20 February 1984). For a fuller analysis of al-Da'wa's ideology, see A. Bar'am, "The Shi'ite Opposition in Iraq Under the Ba'th, 1968-1984," paper presented to the Colloquium on Religious Radicalism and Politics in the Middle East, the Hebrew University, May 13-15, 1985.

5. *Jeune Afrique*, 25 January 1984.

6. *Amal* (Beirut), 30 November 1984.

7. The ideological positions and military communiqués of Islamic Action are carried regularly by the Tehran journal *al-Shahid*.

8. Interview with Fakhr-Ruhani, *Ettela'at* (Tehran), 9 January 1984.

9. For further biographical details, see Martin Kramer, "Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah," *Orient* (Opladen) 26, No. 2 (June 1985), pp. 147-49.

10. Fadlallah is also the author of an important theoretical tract on the permissibility of using force in Islam; see his *Mantiq al-quwwa fi'l-Islam*, 3rd ed. (Beirut, 1985). Also most revealing is his lecture on Islamic resistance, published in pamphlet form as *al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya* (n.p., 1984). Here he makes his fullest justification for the suicidal method.

11. Details of the platform in *al-Safir* (Beirut), 17 February 1985.